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ABSTRACT

A project was designed so that two Ph.D candidates in English education at New York University (NYU), Bob and Betsy, could observe one another's classes and participate in the course, taking part in discussions and group work and even writing some of the assigned papers. For fifteen weeks, the teachers attended each other's freshman writing courses, each of which met twice a week for a total of three hours. Differences in student participation, behavior of the teacher, and lesson plans were observed, with Betsy's behavior and conscious actions setting up the kind of classroom culture that would encourage autonomous behavior within a community of writers. The hypothesis that it is possible to create a classroom culture developed. This hypothesis was tested when Bob began teaching a course at a community college whose spring semester started four weeks later than the one at NYU. Bob reconstructed his course outline to more closely resemble Betsy's, and the quality of his class improved. (DF)

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RELEARNING TO TEACH:

PEER OBSERVATION AS A MEANS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

Elizabeth Rorschach and Robert Whitney

In graduate school, and afterward in the college or university, a great deal of emphasis is placed on developing ourselves as scholars, and very little on developing ourselves as teachers. There are probably many reasons for this, but one of them surely is the fact that the products of scholarship are tangible, while the products of teaching are not. Two years ago, we were both preceptors in the Expository Writing Program (EWP) at New York University, where we were Ph.D candidates in English Education, a combination designed to encourage our interests in teaching. Among English Education students at the EWP the conversation about teaching, learning, linguistics and discourse theory and their application in the classroom tends to be quite engaged and intense. Yet even in such an intellectually rich and supportive environment the discussion of teaching has its limits: the talk was good as far as it went, but it didn't really satisfy our need to look closely at what was happening with our writing courses.

We were both, at that point, experienced teachers, having been teaching freshman writing courses in various colleges for ten years between us--experienced enough to know that the translation process from good idea to effective lesson is often unpredictable. We both enjoyed the talk, but we knew that something was missing: the phenomena themselves--the actual events of the classroom--remain locked away behind closed doors. It is one thing to talk

about what happens in our classes or to share ideas and lesson plans; it is quite another thing to be the one who is there when class is in session, trying to put these ideas into practice and meeting with the unexpected reactions of students. Despite prodigious amounts of talking, we often remained baffled about why certain things worked and why other things didn't, or why our classroom successes and failures so frequently stood in contradiction to the predictions of theory. Even when the talking did help us "understand" these events, our new understandings were seldom of use in getting something different to happen the next time. We needed a way to carry these discussions further, a way of connecting them more directly to the classroom experience itself.

We don't want to give the impression that there were, at this point in the development process, specific problems which we had identified and wanted to examine. On the contrary, we didn't know what we were looking for. We only shared a sense that there was a lot more to teaching than had yet been put into words and that whatever these unspoken dimensions were, we would have to be there to understand them. We discussed this issue several times with our colleague, Lil Brannon, and after considering several possibilities we decided to attend each other's freshman writing classes in the role of students--an informal version of the participant-observer role used in ethnographic research.

We expected that there would be two advantages to this participant-observer approach. First, the project would be intensive and organic. That is, we would not be just observing each other's teaching once or twice during the semester, getting bits and pieces of the courses, but participating in the courses as if we were members of the community, taking part in discussions and group work and even writing some of the assigned papers. This meant that we

would be able to see each course as a whole, from the inside--to view each class meeting within a context which would gradually build throughout the semester so we could get the feeling, as well as the appearance, of what was happening. It also meant, we hoped, that we would get to experience what it was like to be a student in our courses--something we were aware that we really didn't know much about.

Second, having another pedagogically aware person to report on what happened in the classes would allow for what ethnographers call "triangulation"--analyzing events from more than one viewpoint, a method which tends to enrich the analysis. In practical terms this meant that the other teacher would provide a means of checking or testing our interpretations of events, providing us with a means to make our understanding of what had happened more inclusive and complete.

Our project's design turned out to be quite simple: For fifteen weeks, we attended each other's freshman writing courses, each of which met twice a week for a total of three hours. Our classes met on the same days, with a one-hour break between the two. The teacher in each class taught as she normally would, while the observer took the role of a student, participating in class discussions, writing drafts for most of the assignments, and sharing his writing in peer groups with the other students. We each kept a notebook on the experience. We met once a week for about an hour to discuss what had been happening, we wrote biweekly letters to each other about our responses to the project, and we tape recorded some of the classes and most of our weekly meetings. In our earliest plans, we thought we might not tell the students that there was an observer so that we would be seen in their eyes as students, but we abandoned that idea as too risky, thinking that the students might find out and have genuine cause to feel betrayed. On the first day of classes the

teacher simply introduced the observer, said something about what we were doing, and asked the students to treat the observer as they would any other student.

In the beginning weeks we tended to avoid making comparisons between our classes--it seemed too dangerously evaluative. This period was interesting but relatively uneventful. We were both quite nervous the first day or two, but in our meeting the first week we found things we liked about each other's teaching, and the nervousness went away. This was probably crucial. Had we criticized each other initially the resulting increase in anxiety might have crippled our ability to work together in the open and trusting way which made this experience of collaboration so rich for us both.

After a couple of weeks, and quite fortunately as it turns out, we noticed that we were avoiding comparison and judgement and decided to give up this unspoken taboo. This proved to be one of the most important additions to our method, and led to some of our richest insights. We think what made the comparisons so powerful was the multiplicity and diversity of points of view, something which doesn't happen with solo teaching, or even with team teaching of a single course when both teachers constantly share the leadership role. In one class Betsy was in the role of leader, and Bob in the role of participant, and in the other class we reversed roles. Though we were never, of course, really in the roles of students (among other things, we weren't being graded and we had no doubts about our abilities to perform well as freshmen writers), our roles were different enough to allow us to hold divergent perceptions of the same events, and then to compare those divergent perceptions with perceptions of events in the other class, seen from reversed roles. It was this multiplicity of points of view which led to the most important new

learnings and insights, and which allowed us, in the third week, to make a discovery that shaped the rest of the semester for us.

Right from the beginning we had noticed two things: On a philosophical level we were in almost complete agreement. Ideas of active learning, promoting the autonomy of students, forming a community in the classroom, and writing as the making of meaning shaped most of our planning and provided a framework in which we interpreted classroom events. Actually, we were a little surprised to find just how much in agreement we were philosophically.

On an experiential level, however, our classes were very different. This also was a surprise, but we initially avoided paying much attention to it. The difference had to do with what we might call an "atmosphere" of participation. This is not easy to describe in words in a way which conveys how striking it was in experience. We both felt markedly more comfortable in Betsy's class, and the students seemed to participate more. In Betsy's class the students spoke a lot, actively and freely participating in the discussions she initiated. There were silences, but they had a thoughtful quality to them and did not make us feel anxious. It seemed to both of us that the students in her class had begun to accept their own abilities to carry on a discussion without the explicit leadership of the teacher. That is, students didn't wait to be called on by the teacher before speaking, they addressed each other as well as the teacher, and they asked a lot of their own questions rather than just answering the teacher's. In Bob's class however, the students were uncomfortably quiet unless addressed directly by Bob. It was as if Bob had much more control over what was happening in the class, a control that made the conversation revolve around him and seemed to stifle the students.

In our third weekly meeting we could no longer ignore this difference. Actually, the difference was so great it was hard to ignore, but when our

unspoken agreement to avoid comparisons proved insufficient we simply explained away this difference as resulting from the differences in our students. The fact was, our students were different. Betsy was teaching an out-of-sequence course and over half of her students were upperclassmen. Bob was teaching all freshmen in a "natural science" section of the second semester course, which had the reputation of attracting the students least interested in writing. Those in Betsy's class were older (average age of about 25) than those in Bob's class (average age of about 19), and some of the students in Betsy's class had returned to school after interrupting their schooling in order to begin careers or families. Bob's class had a higher percentage of pre-medical or pre-dental students (whose concern for grades and aversion for the uncertainties of writing are well known at NYU). It was thus easy for us to account for the differences between our two classes by pointing to the types of students we had--those in Betsy's class were more independent and motivated to learn, more able to work autonomously with minimal direction from the teacher, than the more typical NYU freshmen in Bob's class. This afforded us a perfectly good explanation for any differences we might find. Furthermore, Betsy had taught one of the natural science sections like Bob's in a previous year, and had had similar difficulties getting much participation on the part of the students.

We felt there was a problem, however, with attributing the difference we experienced between our classes to the differences in the students: if we blamed the students, however deserving they might be, we weren't going to get to learn anything much about teaching. How could we learn about teaching by explaining everything that happened as if it had resulted from differences in the students? So we decided to try what seemed to us at the time to be a bold, interpretive experiment: what if we adopt the proposition that the differences in our classrooms result from differences in our behavior as teachers? This

proposed interpretation seemed a little threatening, and a whole lot more interesting as well.

At this point we decided to add several tools to our method of inquiry. We began tape recording our classes so that we could look more closely at our classroom behavior. We had a sense that we were probably behaving differently in our roles, but it was not immediately apparent how, since neither of us really sought to create an authoritarian classroom, and both of us went to great lengths to encourage participation, arranging the chairs in a circle and conducting our classes mostly as conversations of one kind or another.

At this point we had identified a problem to solve--something we wanted to know more about--and our only fear was that we might have stumbled on it after the relevant patterns of behavior were already formed, too late to find out how they had gotten that way. We wished we had tape recorded the first few classes, but we also reasoned that whatever we had done in the early classes to set things up, we were probably still repeating in some form or other in each succeeding class. We also decided to look at the sequence of our lesson plans for those first three weeks to see if any differences in the progression of each course would help us explain the experienced differences in the communities we had produced.

Our examination of the lesson plans revealed something very interesting, for it showed how two people who sought the same outcome could differ on the means of achieving it. All along, we had been talking about our goals for our courses: We each wanted our students to become autonomous writers, no longer needing direction from the teacher in order to make decisions when writing, willing to accept responsibility for the decisions they made, and understanding to what extent their peers and teacher could help them come to know the effects of their decisions on readers.

It was clear, then, that the essential difference in our courses didn't lie in our goals; we both wanted our students to end up at the same place, and we defined that place in similar ways. And our perceived differences in our classes did not dispel this sense of agreement on goals. Just the opposite. The fact that we both tended to feel that those goals were being achieved more in Betsy's class than in Bob's tended to confirm our sense that we were talking about the same thing and, moreover, that it was recognizable in practice.

As we compared our lesson plans for the first three weeks, we talked about the strategies we had been following in constructing our courses.

Betsy's course:	Bob's course:
- - Week 1 - -	
Introduction: course requirements (essay topics to come from journal entries)	Introduction: course requirements (essay topics come from in-class writing exercises)
10 minute. freewriting about last writing course taken	whole class: "freewriting" to discover a topic; write briefly about process of doing freewriting
homework: write two journal entries; read in textbook about doing journals	whole class: discussion of both
	homework: work more on freewriting
- - day 2 - -	
with partner: share journal entries; whole class discussion of the move from private to public in writing; of what it's like to respond to writing and be responded to	whole class: "memory chain" to discover a topic; write briefly about process of doing memory chain
	whole class: discussion of both
homework: write more entries; read 2 sample student essays in textbook	homework: work more on memory chain topic

Betsy's course:	Bob's course:
- - Week 2 - -	
with partner: share journal entries: comment to help development of entry into essay	whole class: "writing to learn" to begin response to a reading assignment; write briefly about process of doing "writing to learn"
in groups: discuss the sample essays	
whole class: discussion of essays	whole class: discussion of both
homework: choose an entry to begin expanding into an essay	homework: finish reading assignment begun in class; continue writing about it
- - day 2 - -	
whole group: loop writing (Elbow) on: What is the role of the teacher or student in the writing class?; write briefly on process of loop writing; whole class discussion of both	discussion groups: on reading assignment to generate ideas for essay topics
	whole class: writing about group discussions, to find topic
homework: have essay and copies ready for groups; read another sample student essay	homework: work more on writing about topic generated by group discussions
- - Week 3 - -	
whole group: respond to sample student essay--what are your expectations?	whole class: write about an early experience with writing; write briefly about process of writing this
whole group: discussion of our responses	whole class: discussion of both; during discussion, model and talk about doing "active listening" as something to use in groups when commenting on each other's essays
homework: write comments on copies of group members' essays; begin writing essay 2	homework: bring in draft of first essay
- - day 2 - -	
group discussions of comments	meet in groups: to respond to draft of essay 1
homework: keep going on essay 2; read chapter on revising	homework: revise essay 1

At first glance, these outlines didn't seem essentially different. Both involve whole class discussions, small group discussion, peer response to drafts, student generated writing topics, reading and freewriting in class. To us, as we went through the first three weeks with the students, the progression of events seemed like different arrangements of largely similar elements. However, when we compared this progression on paper in the third week, and began to talk about why we had arranged them in the ways we had, we saw at least one essential difference. This was not a difference of philosophy, or of classroom method or execution, but of what might be called "strategy" or the means we envisioned to get to our shared long-term goal of having the students realize their abilities as autonomous writers, people who can write on their own authority--authors for short.

For both of us this long-term goal required a change not only in the ways students went about writing, but also in their concepts of writing itself. We shared the impression, verified repeatedly by the students, that they come to the university with a well developed misconception of the nature of writing as a human activity, and that this misconception hobbles them as writers. This misconception has several parts:

They tend to think of writing as a kind of formal exercise in which correctness is either the primary or the only criterion of success. Few if any of them have ever experienced writing as the making of meaning--an engaged activity which the writer pursues because it is directly rewarding to do so. They have little sense of the problem of audience--of how making meaning for a reader differs from making meaning for oneself. They see a writing assignment as a kind of test of their ability to correctly follow instructions.

All this amounts to a belief system of enormous proportions, which hobbles them not just as writers, but as thinkers and learners as well. Because of

this we both have come to believe that a major goal of a writing course must be to help the student replace these misconceptions with a more realistic understanding of what successful writing entails, and we both constructed the early weeks of our semester with this goal in mind. However, our conception of an appropriate means for achieving this goal proved significantly different.

The focus in Betsy's class during the first three weeks was on creating a different understanding of the classroom interactions themselves: learning new rules and procedures for a course in which authority is shared. Betsy went to considerable lengths to demonstrate these new role expectations, and set up her assignments with the intention of giving the class opportunities to think about them (e.g., freewriting and discussion on the role of the teacher/student in a writing class). Though it does not show up in the syllabus outline, she even went so far as to repeatedly dramatize the non-authoritarian "culture" that she was developing. For example, at one point during a discussion she left her seat and moved to a chair at the back of the room, outside the discussion circle. After listening for a while (and purposely neither speaking nor making eye contact with the students as they spoke) she interrupted to ask why everyone was craning his neck around to speak to the back of the room. She used this drama as a way of initiating a discussion of classroom roles and acknowledging each other's authority.

The focus of Bob's first three weeks was on creating a different understanding for the activity of writing itself: getting the students to do a lot of short, generative writing assignments to help them gain a sense of writing as a generative activity. Students wrote in class each day, discussing as a large group what had happened as they wrote. Throughout these discussions, Bob was the recognized leader, setting the tasks and asking the

questions, and since the focus was on writing and its processes, the classroom roles remained largely unaffected.

As time went on it was this issue of the role of the teacher in effecting the distribution of authority which became a central focus for our inquiry. The change we needed to undergo in order to successfully distribute authority was important, yet subtle: Betsy was no less a leader than Bob during those first three weeks, or for that matter during the rest of the semester. She also set the tasks for the students, and was the primary agenda setter for the course as a whole, as was Bob. Nevertheless, her leadership had a different intention and purpose: to help the students discover their own autonomy and authority in and through the classroom conversation. The idea was that once they began to experience this new relationship to themselves, each other, their teacher, and the educational process, it would transfer to their writing as well since their writing was part of the same conversation. Bob's idea was to approach the changed relationship to writing directly without giving much attention to the classroom and its dynamics.

This difference in intention had small but significant effects on the ways we employed the various elements of instruction. The students in Betsy's class began working with each other in small groups at the second class session; those in Bob's class met in groups for the first time one week later, at the fourth class session. We felt that this delay, in combination with more frequent in-class writing assignments, allowed the students in Bob's class to maintain their understandings of the classroom as composed of one-way conversations with the teacher. While both of us had set out to build a community of writers, Betsy used the spoken conversation as the vehicle for the distribution of authority. Bob used the relationship of each writer to his writing as a vehicle, giving little attention to the form of the spoken

conversation, and ended up emphasizing writing as a solitary activity, in spite of Bob's intentions to the contrary.

It is important to think of how all this affected the perceptions of the students, a phenomenon we could at least speculate on from our positions as participant-observers. Take, for example, the students' perception of how the writing assignments were given. Both of us believed that the students should come up with their own topics as much as possible since choosing what to generate must be an integral part of any generative act. Both of us in fact offered this freedom, but we believe that only in Betsy's class did most of the students understand it and begin to make real use of it: choosing, from their journals, topics that they were personally interested in. In Bob's class the students remained in an uncomfortable no-man's land between choosing their own topics and choosing what they thought Bob wanted them to choose. In spite of Bob's repeated entreaties to choose for themselves, this discomfort with choice remained throughout the semester. In the students' perception the authority remained in Bob's hands, and most never came to experience themselves as the authors of their own choices.

Next we turned our attention to our behaviors in the classes themselves. After the third week, we began audiotaping class sessions, and we listened to parts of these tapes in our weekly meetings, transcribing particularly important portions. We were especially interested in portions of the class period which might be related to the differences in student participation: the beginnings, the ways discussions were initiated and conducted, our behaviors in most activities and the ways our actions facilitated or interfered with autonomous activity by the students.

We also had begun by this time to develop a concept of classroom "culture." Somehow, in the early weeks of a semester, probably in the first

few meetings, a culture or style of interaction gets established, complete with role expectations, values, interpretations, procedures and cultural or shared understandings into which all the events in the classroom are fitted. No one individual creates this culture; it is the product of all the people involved, but once it is established it has a life of its own and determines the meaning of much of what goes on. It is no doubt a subculture of the surrounding culture, and is greatly influenced by the participants' previous school experiences.

Our concern with studying this culture was not intended to make us anthropologists of the classroom, but to become more effective teachers. We were convinced, from our past experiences as teachers, that once this culture was formed, it was very hard to change. We began to think of our pedagogical acts as culture-shaping acts, and of events in the classroom as understandable only when the intangible element of culture is included. It is here that the multiple points of view were most helpful. Culture is always complex, consisting of the interaction among people, and at best only a fragment of it is perceivable by any one observer, especially if that observer is in a leadership role. Culture is precisely that which is manifest in the group and is held by no one individual. It may be possible for a trained anthropologist to understand a culture by herself, but for us the "triangulation" was invaluable. After all, we had been trying to understand these phenomena on our own for several years without much success.

Actually, as writing teachers, our concerns with culture were limited. We were mainly concerned with a single dimension of culture along a continuum between what we believed to be more typical of classroom cultures (namely passivity, anonymity, and even competition on the parts of the students) to the kind of classroom culture in which active learning, shared authority, and

collaboration predominate. We both wanted to replace the typical culture with something more suitable to the teaching of writing, in the belief that a new culture was necessary if our courses were to be helpful to our students in their struggles to become autonomous writers. However, our ideas about how this autonomy could be attained were different in ways which became clear once we compared our course outlines. And if our ideas about how classroom cultures develop were true, it seemed possible that the differences in our course outlines could account for some of the differences in the ways that students behaved in our two courses. It made sense to us that, if students are urged to think about their roles in class and to talk to each other in small groups as well as in large groups, then these students would be more likely to actively participate in all class activities. Analysis of audiotape transcripts, in conjunction with our shared sense of how each class was going, supported our hypothesis.

In Betsy's class the students were talking a great deal more than the teacher, and there was much more talk addressed by students to other students. As we noted earlier, students asked each other questions and didn't wait to be called on by the teacher before speaking. Though it wasn't apparent on the audiotape, we also noted that Betsy made a point of not looking at the students when they were speaking, thus forcing them to look around the room at their other listeners. Perhaps the most important finding in the transcripts for Betsy's class was the pauses, almost none of which were interrupted by the teacher. Betsy would begin a discussion by asking a question, and then would remain silent, waiting for a student to respond. Unlike Bob, who would usually say something himself if nobody responded, Betsy would wait until somebody spoke, even if the silence seemed interminable. We timed the silences, and most of them were about 5-7 seconds long, but one was 15 seconds long, and

another was 23 seconds long. We surmised then that Betsy's behavior and conscious actions had somehow set up the kind of classroom culture that would encourage autonomous behavior within a community of writers. But we had to wonder to what extent Betsy's students had made it easy for her to build the culture she wanted--could the same community feeling be attained with a different group of students?

Bob had always been dissatisfied with the quality of classroom discussions in his courses, but since nothing he had done in an attempt to improve them had made much difference, he had begun to wonder if he was wishing for something which was unattainable--maybe he was hoping for a quality of participation of which college freshmen were simply incapable. Now he had reason to believe otherwise, and what was more, we had some clues which might help him change his own behavior in ways which would make a difference. What we needed was a way to test our hypothesis that the behavioral and strategic differences we had identified were indeed sufficient to create a different culture in Bob's classes.

Fortuitously, such an opportunity was available almost immediately because Bob was also teaching at a community college whose spring semester started four weeks later than NYU's. He reconstructed his course outline in the light of what he and Betsy thought they had learned about culture building and included several classroom dramas of the type Betsy had used, leaving the emphasis on writing to develop as the course progressed. He put this plan into effect, and was a little astonished by how well it worked. In his new classes at the community college, and for the first time in his teaching career, he had discussions in the classroom which he enjoyed participating in, and which didn't feel as though he were pulling them out of the students line by line.

Does all this mean that as teachers we are then to take Betsy's outline as the final word on freshman composition? We don't believe so. The kind of experiential knowledge we generated in the course of our study is probably largely tacit and thus not generalizable beyond our own classrooms. It was not our intention to generate knowledge with wider application--all we wanted was to learn something about our own teaching, and to construct a vehicle for carrying our development as teachers further. What is sharable, we feel, is our method: peer collaboration as a way of professional development for teachers, and as a method of faculty development for institutions which train teachers, or want to support the improvement of teaching. There are many ways this could be done--peer observation is only one of them--but the need must arise from the teachers themselves so that they can work with peers on developing "research" methods appropriate to the kinds of pedagogical problems they want to investigate. We eventually found that the method we had used was more elaborate than necessary--but then we started out not knowing what we were seeking so we needed to use a large net. If we were to repeat the study, it would probably be possible to make the necessary observations in only two or three weeks of participation, that is, if we knew what we were looking for. We also feel that classroom visits are only one of several methods that are possible to gain more information about what is going on in our classrooms.

Currently there is much talk--in writing projects, at conferences, and among colleagues--of classroom research. For some, the term "research" carries with it all the connotations of statistical methodology and experimental design that most teachers probably believe are beyond their abilities. When the goal of such "research" is to produce knowledge which has universal applicability--reliable knowledge for the larger community as a whole--probably carefully constructed methodology is necessary, and if we wanted to repeat our study for

such purposes we would have to set up the necessary scientific controls appropriate to the generation of such knowledge.

However, generalizable knowledge does not have to be the intention of an investigator. We set out to learn some things which would be useful in our own teaching and we feel that we succeeded. For that, a casual and exploratory methodology was much more appropriate, perhaps even necessary. No doubt a great deal of what we learned is not in this paper, nor even as yet consciously conceptualized in our own minds--it exists in the realm of what Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge" and informs our decisions in the classroom without our even being aware of what it is.

One of the richest aspects of this project was the direct experience of another teacher's classroom over a period of time, and a chance to think and talk about that experience with another teacher who was present. This is whole person learning of a kind that perhaps cannot ever be fully abstracted. Though we do not now consider ourselves ethnographers (our training in anthropological methodology is next to non-existent), we do understand something of the lure of that discipline, the power of the direct experience of another culture with the goal of understanding its working. We both found our project a rich and rewarding experience, which led us to wonder if the primary beneficiary of ethnographic studies is perhaps the ethnographer herself in that she experiences something with a richness and wholeness that can allow her to view events in unexpected ways.

Such experience seems to wake up a kind of capacity for cultural awareness which we didn't know we had, and once awakened, that awareness applies even to participation in the familiar cultures in which we usually live and work. In fact, that was the primary benefit that Betsy felt she got from the study--a heightened awareness of what she was doing in her own classroom, and an

expanded ability to step back from and analyze her own behavior as a teacher. Prior to the study she had felt satisfied with her teaching, but she didn't know why, because she had nothing to compare it to and no conceptual system to analyze it. Our work afforded her that, and enriched her experience of her own classroom as well.

As teachers, we want to be able to develop continually, and it seems to us that our project has provided us with new ways to look at ourselves, ways that will allow for further development. As teachers, we can hardly hope for more than that.